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ABSTRACT

To discover how far judgments about need are consistent across schools, a national sample of special needs coordinators was asked to say how many children with reading difficulties existed in their schools. Responses from schools where mean levels of reading were high were compared with those where mean levels were lower. Analysis indicates that perception of reading difficulty tends to vary with the level of reading in the school: in schools where mean levels are higher, a child is more likely to be considered to have a reading difficulty than an equivalent child in a school where mean levels are lower. It is concluded that increasing use of within-school assessment raises the danger of resources being diverted away from those most in need. (Contains 19 references, a table, and 3 figures of data.) (RS)

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The Identification of "Need" in Reading

By

Gary Thomas and Pauline Davis

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The identification of 'need' in reading (BERA conference, 13 September 1996)

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Summary

To discover how far judgements about *need* are consistent across schools, a national sample of special needs coordinators was asked to say how many children with reading difficulties existed in their schools. Responses from schools where mean levels of reading were high were compared with those where mean levels were lower. Analysis indicates that perception of reading difficulty tends to vary with the level of reading in the school: in schools where mean levels are higher, a child is more likely to be considered to have a reading difficulty than an equivalent child in a school where mean levels are lower. It is concluded that increasing use of within-school assessment raises the danger of resources being diverted away from those most in need.

Introduction

The Warnock (DES, 1978) notion of one-in-five was supposed to reduce the dependence on tight definition. The new notion was about spotting and tackling children's difficulties as they arose rather than identifying specific children. However, the practices which have followed in the wake of the Warnock recommendations have failed to live up to expectation. Goacher et al (1988) and Riddell and Brown (1994) and Thomas (1995) have pointed to the difficulties in operationalising the idea of one-in-five - an idea that depends on relating the learning of one child to that of another. The idea was to make assessment more criterion-related - to highlight children's difficulties when they arose and to direct resources to them. However, in baldly stating the epidemiologically arrived-at figure of one-in-five lies the danger of erecting a target at which consequent relativistic assessments of need will aim. The result has been that 'one-in-five' has ended up being 'reified' (Lunt and Evans, 1994), and Fulcher (1989) has suggested that the effect has been to increase to 20 per cent the number of children who are deemed to be disabled. The consequence has been an escalation (to 20 per cent) of numbers of children with special needs (see also Tomlinson, 1985, for a discussion of this phenomenon).

Thus, the recent Code of Practice (DfE1994) was conceived largely because of problems which arose from difficulties of definition and quantification. These were highlighted by the Audit Commission/HMI (1992) who found that schools, faced with the requirements of the national curriculum and the pressures of competition, were referring increasing numbers of children for assessment. A large part of the problem, with increasing

numbers of new referrals, was the lack of objective definition of learning difficulties. In effect, any child could be referred.

The Code thus instituted a series of 'triggers' for various stages of extra monitoring or support being provided for a child. These triggers are determined by a set of criteria which supposedly make objective any judgement about a child's difficulty. In practice, however, the likelihood is that these judgements are made relativistically and predominantly involve within-school comparison.

This paper seeks to examine this last proposition. It arises out of research conducted for The Cadmean Trust into provision for children with reading difficulties since the 1988 Education Reform Act. One aspect of the study concerned teachers' definitions of reading difficulty within their own schools, given a diminished reliance on the 'objective' measures just discussed. One of the aims of the research therefore was to examine the ways in which teachers defined reading difficulty for themselves. Related to this was the question of whether such definitions - presumably currently relying on more relativistic and impressionistic judgements than hitherto - were mirrored in official judgements about a child's difficulty, notably those resulting from the statementing procedure.

The latter question has profound implications for the resourcing of the education service in the post-Code environment. The possibility arises that if judgements about need are arrived at on a relativistic basis, resourcing may be differentially favouring schools where the mean level of attainment is *higher*. In other words, if teachers come to make judgements about need and special need by comparing children one against another in their classes, those children with 'difficulty' in schools where mean levels are high may, if psychologists and others responsible for global oversight are influenced by such within-school identification, be favoured against those with equivalent or even greater difficulty in schools where mean levels are lower. Evidence is already beginning to accumulate that this may be the case (Gross, 1996).

Although there has been much discussion recently (compare Turner, 1991, and Wray, 1991) about whether reading attainment is falling, there has been little or no discussion about the increasingly relativistic ways in which reading difficulty is assessed, although some research has touched on this (eg Croll and Moses, 1985). This omission is a serious one, for the idiosyncrasies of relativistic judgement have important consequences. Not least amongst these is the danger that the machinery of resource allocation becomes distorted in such a way that resources are not distributed in favour of those most in need. Judgements of reading difficulty may here act as a microcosm for judgements about special needs generally in a post-Code climate, given that the Code will, with its reliance on school-based assessment, promulgate and legitimise the dependence on local (ie

within-school) relative judgements of need. In any case, even without the Code, assessments by psychologists have for some time given relatively more weight to a more heterogeneous set of indicators as to a child's difficulty - and a crucial one will be the teacher's view about a child (see Gillham, 1978; Brown and Campione, 1986; Wolfendale et al, 1992). The Code may merely exaggerate the effects of reliance on such heterogeneity.

The reliance on a wider range of instruments (and especially the increased validity afforded to the teacher's view) is in many ways to be welcomed though the corollary is clearly that regional and national monitoring, coordination, planning and decision-making may be distorted. There is the additional concern that positive action to favour those children in the greatest need may fail to materialise as locally contingent decisions favour those children in more advantaged areas.

To examine these questions and issues further, a sub-set of the data from the Cadmean project was examined to determine whether teachers' assessments of the extent of 'reading difficulty' varied according to the overall level of reading attainment in the school.

Method

Questionnaires were sent to coordinators for special educational needs (SENCOs) in a national sample of schools with a Y4 intake. Given that responses to 'cold-start' postal questionnaires are generally below 30 per cent and usually around 20 per cent (compare Page, 1995), a sample of 3000 schools was randomly selected from a database covering all schools in England and Wales. The expected return of around 600 would thereby give a sample sufficiently large to check for representativeness and internal consistency. The response rate was very close to that expected at just under 20 per cent (n=594) and the absolute numbers responding have enabled checks on the representativeness of the sample, which appears satisfactory.

Findings and analysis

The particular focus in this paper is on SENCOs' perceptions and consequent definitions of reading difficulty. This question is analysed by examining perception and consequent quantification of reading difficulty against the numbers of children at various National Curriculum levels in reading in responding schools.

Looking first at the proportion of children in the year group adjudged to have difficulties in reading, 31 per cent of responding teachers said that 20-29 per cent of the year group had difficulties in reading (as shown in Table 1).

TABLE 1 Percentages of teachers assuming proportions of Year 4 to have difficulties in reading

proportion of Y4s judged to have reading difficulties	up to 10%	10-19%	20-30%	over 30%
percentage of teachers	24	26	31	19

Around a quarter of respondents said that up to 10 per cent of the year group had difficulties and a similar proportion felt that 10-19 per cent had difficulties. A smaller proportion felt that the number with difficulties was over 30 per cent.

The majority of pupils in Year 4 in most of the schools were reading at NC level 3 and the majority of pupils with reading difficulties were at level 2.

As one would expect, there are more children reported to have reading difficulties in schools with lower mean reading levels than in schools where the reading level is higher (24 per cent are assumed to have difficulty where most children are at level 2, 19 per cent where most are at level 3, and 16 per cent where most are at level 4 - see figure 1).

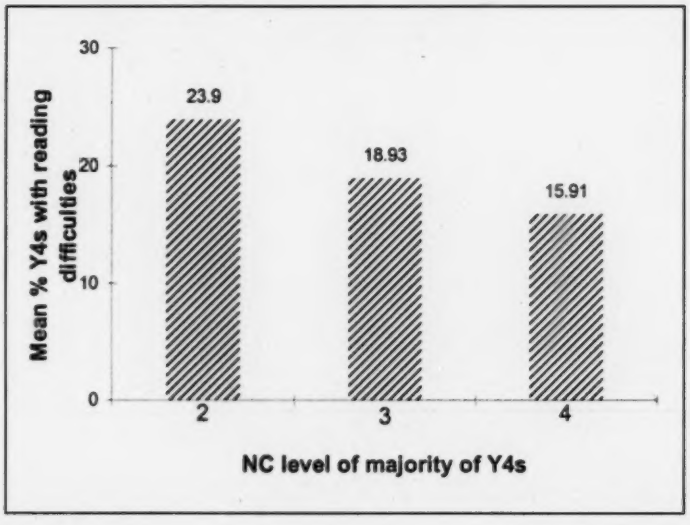

FIGURE 1 The mean percentage of Y4s with reading difficulties (unstatemented) by the level of the majority in the year group.

This finding is in line with common-sense expectations. However, the position is complicated by the fact that equivalent children are judged differently in different schools where overall reading level is different. For example, a child reading at just below level 2 in a school where the mean NC level is 3 is more likely to be considered by teachers to

have a reading difficulty than an equivalent child in a school where the mean NC level is 2 (Pearson chi square significant at less than 0.0005). Thus, figure 2 shows that in classes where most children are at level 2, the mean NC level of a child perceived to have reading difficulties is 1.65, while in classes where most children are at level 4, the mean level of a child with reading difficulties is 2.28. In other words, in schools where the majority of Y4 are reading at level 2, the NC level of children perceived as having reading difficulties is lower than in schools where the average level of reading is higher. In schools with a majority reading at levels 3 or 4, on average children are deemed to have a reading difficulty if they are reading at level 2. However, where most children are at NC level 2, children are only perceived to have a reading difficulty if they are between levels 1 and 2.

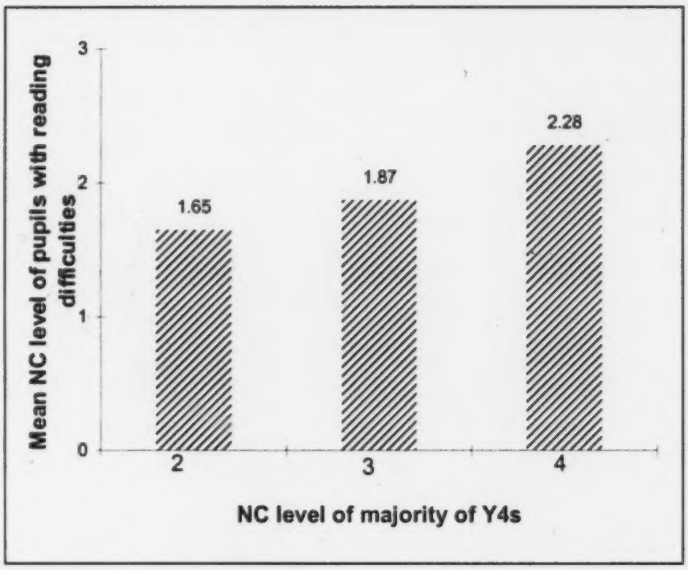

FIGURE 2 The mean NC level in reading of Y4 pupils judged to have reading difficulties by the level of the majority in the year group.

One can see why this might be the case: in a school where most children are at level 2, children who are just below this level will not be considered to be especially out of the ordinary. Teachers' assessments of reading difficulty will to an extent be made after within-class comparisons.

Thus, the distribution shown in figure 1 shows, as one would predict, more children with reading difficulties in schools where overall levels of reading are lower. However, acceptance of this finding without taking analysis further would mask an important fact: that it is 'easier' to be identified as a child with reading difficulties if the class level of reading is relatively high. This may be unimportant at a within-school level. However, such judgements of reading difficulty by teachers based on within-school relativity may - if

they are used for any purpose outside the individual school - give a distorted picture concerning the incidence and distribution of reading difficulty regionally and nationally. It may lead on to serious anomaly where there are questions of between-school allocation of resources.

The situation is particularly serious therefore if such relativistic judgements are made as part of the statementing process. The data here indicate that such relativity is indeed used. Figure 3 shows that for children with reading difficulties, there is a greater tendency for these children to be statemented if the NC level of the majority of the children is 3 or 4 than if it is at level 2. The probability of this distribution of scores is significant, however, only at the 10 per cent level and further work needs to be undertaken to establish the validity of the assertion concerning statementing. It is worth noting, though, that children who are statemented for reading in some schools are performing better than the majority of children in some other schools.

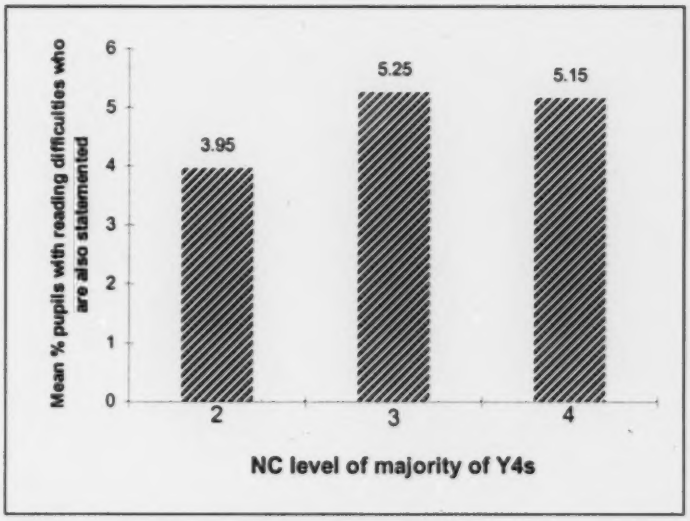

FIGURE 3 The mean per cent of Y4s with reading difficulties who are statemented for reading, by the NC level of the majority in the year group

Conclusions

On the basis of this research it may tentatively be concluded that current changes in forms of assessment mean that

i. within a school, reading difficulty is perceived relative to the majority of children in the year group;
ii. across schools nationally, there is inconsistency in the reading standard that constitutes a difficulty;

iii. there is inconsistency in the level of reading difficulty that leads to statementing, and proportionately fewer pupils are statemented in schools where the number of pupils perceived to have reading difficulty is higher;
iv. 'one-in-five' is taken by special needs coordinators in some schools as a benchmark figure which will convey information about the incidence of children with difficulty in a school, irrespective of the school's context.

The absence of objective measures of difficulty has led to increased reliance on subjective, relativistic judgements of difficulty, such as those recommended in the Code of Practice. The analysis undertaken here indicates that while this may represent a useful means of determination of 'difficulty' at a within-school level, it may give rise to serious distortion if the process is relied upon for decisions concerning between-school allocation of resources, such as that occurring as part of the statementing process. The data here indicate that such relativity is indeed used. (A wider issue is opened up here as to the way in which supposedly criterion-referenced measures operate, and whether they in fact are applied in relation to tacitly held norms.)

There is evidence here that this process extends to statementing. If confirmed through replication, this has important ramifications. It indicates that professionals such as psychologists and administrators who are responsible for statementing and an across-school overview, in relying less on norm-referenced measures than once would have been the case, may currently be overly influenced by within-school identification in their assessments of reading difficulty. Given that LEAs' funding formulae rely at least in part on levels of statementing there is therefore the strong possibility that resources are currently being diverted from those most in need: children in schools which achieve higher results (usually those in more socio-economically favoured areas) may be more likely to be statemented for reading than those where overall performance is lower, with the corollary that funds will be displaced from those more in need. The possibility that an increasingly strong momentum will be given to this process by the Code of Practice with its emphasis on school-based assessment needs to be monitored closely.

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